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LOCAL NEWS

Work continues on Abilene's South Branch library project



Nellie Doneva/Reporter-News

John Morales, left, and Brayden Ivy, right, work on creating inside walls for several new rooms that will be part of the South branch of the Abilene Public Library inside the Mall of Abilene.

By [Brian Bethel](#) of the Abilene Reporter News

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In many respects, the new South Branch of the Abilene Public Library under construction at the Mall of Abilene has been a "moving target," said head librarian Lori Grumet.

Ideally, patrons will walk in the door by October. But a planned conference call Friday will "revisit the schedule," Grumet said Wednesday.

"This project has a lot more detail in it and it's much more complex than we originally anticipated," she said. "But it's going to be phenomenal once it's finished."

Standing amid the almost 20,500-square-foot space that will hold the new South Branch, Grumet said that a previously hoped-for spring opening was "too optimistic," her words punctuated in the background by a jackhammer — the sound, she said, of progress.

Certain components have had a long lead time, Grumet said in explaining some of the project's delays.

Many components require specific fixtures to be in place before other work can be done, she said.

"The electricians can't be working at the same time the mud crew is in mudding the walls, the same time the flooring guy's trying to float the floor," she said.

Grumet estimated the project will cost in the neighborhood of \$1.7 million, including a \$1.5 million contribution by the Friends of the Abilene Public Library.

"That's what they're committed to, and that's the max that they're planning on putting into this project," she said. "That includes everything they've raised, plus a half-million (dollars) of their own money that they have banked."

The rest of the expense comes in the form of furnishings, supplies, rent and other components.

The cost of building a similar space would be an estimated \$30 million versus \$1.5 million in rent over 10 years, Grumet said.

The city did not have money bonded for such a large project, and the South Branch's current location on Danville Drive was "getting so badly squeezed we weren't sure that it would stay viable much

longer," she said.

"We've had plumbing problems, we've had problems with rodents, we've had flooding," she said. "It's tight quarters; the staff have essentially no private areas. They have to eat in their workroom on their workspace or at their desks. It's really congested."

At the moment, the library is paying rent at both the Danville Drive location and at the mall, she said. In July 2015, officials said the space at the mall would increase the South Branch's rent by \$68,872 per year, to around \$135,000 a year.

"We budgeted for that, we knew there was going to be some overlap," Grumet said Wednesday. The library's lease agreement is for 10 years, and possibly could be "adjusted" at the five-year point, she said.

Once the project is completed, its amenities will include new meeting space, a teen room, staff areas and a quiet reading room, though the new space also will reflect how technology has changed libraries.

"We're seeing an increase in the use of our digital materials, and with that there's a corresponding decrease in the number of people who actually walk into the library on a regular basis," Grumet said. "But we're accounting for that with the way we account for our virtual circulation and things that are out in the digital world, and we're trying to supplement the decrease in physical attendance by providing interesting programs people want to attend."

One thing Grumet said patrons likely will enjoy about the new location is its anticipated Sunday hours, the only library branch to offer such.

The original South Branch was meant to be a pilot project and was not intended to stay in its space for more than five years. Seventeen years later, Grumet said the move was long overdue.

"The staff is really looking forward to getting into this space," she said.

About Brian Bethel

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